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# THE ROLE OF PRINCIPALS

SAN FRANCISCO  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS COMMISSION  
REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The San Francisco Public Schools Commission was formed in January 1975 as a cooperative effort by the Board of Education of the San Francisco Unified School District and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. The general objectives of the Commission are to identify problems in the School District and to assist in implementing agreed-upon solutions. The Commission is supported through grants from the San Francisco Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Irwin Foundation, the Gerbode Foundation, and the San Francisco Unified School District.

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**REPORT  
AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS**

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**THE ROLE OF PRINCIPALS  
IN  
SAN FRANCISCO'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS:  
Responsibilities and Performance**

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**THE SAN FRANCISCO  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS COMMISSION  
MAY 1976**

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# SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC SCHOOLS COMMISSION

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MR. WILLIAM M. ROTH  
Chairman

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May 25, 1976

Dr. Lee S. Dolson  
President, Board of Education  
San Francisco Unified School District  
135 Van Ness Avenue  
San Francisco, California 94102

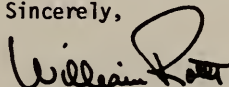
Dear Dr. Dolson:

In our previous report to the Board of Education on "School Site Management", the Commission recommended that further delegation of authority and responsibility to decision-makers at the schools would strengthen the educational process. This report considers the role of principals in that process, recommending that they be given authority to make critical decisions at the school site and that they be held accountable for effective performance.

Throughout our investigation, we were particularly concerned to find no written contracts with principals and no clear policies setting out standards by which their performance can be judged, as required by the City Charter. Further, principals should be held accountable for performance through an evaluation procedure which involves teachers, parents, and older students. The District is violating State law in not instituting an evaluation system. Finally, the ethnic and racial composition of principals does not correspond to that of the student population. This report recommends actions to correct these and other problems.

The School District should increase the levels of responsibility, authority, and accountability among principals through a deliberate but thoughtful process, involving principals and others at the school site. The Commission urges the Board to adopt the recommendations in this report and proceed with implementation of those requiring no further investigation. In those areas needing more detailed development, the Board should direct the Superintendent to design strategies for their implementation.

Sincerely,



William M. Roth  
Chairman





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## BACKGROUND

Throughout its investigation of the School District's management problems, the Commission has been concerned that *responsibility* for making decisions is infrequently matched with the *authority* to implement those decisions. Further, even where responsibility has been matched with commensurate authority, individuals are not held *accountable* for the decisions they make.

The Commission has made recommendations, for example, that the Board of Education grant the Superintendent sufficient authority to administer the School District, while holding him accountable for implementing Board policies. Further, the Commission's recommendations on School Site Management have highlighted the pivotal role of the 125 school principals, and urged that the Board "revise its policies to make clear that in fact the principal is the chief executive officer for each school". Through implementation of site management policies, principals\* would be granted more authority and responsibility, which must be balanced with stricter accountability measures. The Commission's further examination of the role of principals, therefore, has been concerned primarily with the degree to which responsibility, authority, and accountability are related to the management of schools.

This examination began with the series of school site visits made by Commission members during the first six months of the Commission's existence. Subsequent conversations with principals and others on a variety of specific issues, e.g., integration, testing programs, school evaluation profiles, and site management procedures, have provided a wide range of information about the job and problems of the principal. In addition, a series of structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 14 principals to gain a fuller understanding of the issues that influence their performance. The sample included principals from primary, intermediate, junior high, senior high, and alternative schools. Although there was opportunity for open-ended discussion, the interviews were guided by a series of prepared questions, exploring the following specific areas:

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\*The term "principal" is used here to mean the chief administrator at each school site, regardless of the official title of that person. We are aware, for example, of models where teachers rotate on an annual basis through the position of "school administrator", and this appears to be an effective procedure for some schools.

- the relationship between principals and the central office staff;
- the nature of the principal's job description;
- the level of support given principals by the central staff;
- the existence and usefulness of personnel evaluation; and
- the kinds of supportive training needed by principals.

Concurrently, data on principals was collected, including ethnic, sex, and age distribution, and length of service. The Commission's research on the role of principals has therefore involved conversations with a majority of the School District's principals, their staff, central office administrators, the sample of structured interviews, and the companion data collection.

## **PRIMARY ISSUES**

The Commission's experience with school sites has shown that a wide range of competence, enthusiasm, and effectiveness exists among School District principals. The stronger principals understand that they must exercise responsibility to manage the schools, and they assume the authority to do so. Others, however, choose not to be aggressive, trying to manage their schools through as low a profile as possible.

### **The General Problem**

Broadly stated, the problem is that there is no clear policy regarding the job of principal, and no orderly process to implement whatever vague policies do exist. As a result, the management of school sites has suffered.

Strong principals do well in spite of the system, rather than because of it. Since many such principals can be found in the system, many schools function well. But the system is not designed to develop good principals or to hold principals accountable. The person appointed is generally left alone unless a crisis develops. If the crisis is bad enough, the principal may be relieved. Otherwise, the principal is left to fend on his or her own and to try to cope with the regulations and other obstacles to running the school.

This pattern appears to have developed in reaction to a time when most principals had close to absolute authority in the school, governing without much heed to the wishes of parents, students, the community, or the central office of the School District. The racial and economic mix of students in San Francisco schools, and changes in society

generally, make that old style of school governance both impossible and undesirable. But current problems in the schools require that principals be able to make more decisions. The protection against falling back into the old mode is to require that they involve others in the exercise of their authority, to create a support and evaluation system that helps them and holds them responsible, and to move the racial and ethnic mix of principals more toward that of the students and the City.

In its investigations, the Commission identified a number of specific problems which are described below. Our recommendations are directed at these problems. While it was impossible to do an exhaustive study in the time available, we are satisfied that our findings reflect accurately the general situation in the San Francisco Unified School District.

### **The Lack of Written Contracts**

The voters of San Francisco approved in November of 1971 an amendment to the City Charter, Section 135, which states that:

All . . . principals . . . appointed on or after July 1, 1971, or who are otherwise determined not to be permanent employees shall be employed pursuant to four-year contracts with the board of education, which contracts shall be subject to renewal based upon achieving and maintaining standards of performance, which standards of performance shall be governed by rules and regulations as promulgated by the board of education.

No written contract of this kind has ever been entered into with a principal. The District's position seems to be that it is not in violation of the Charter because unwritten contracts with the principal arise out of the written policies and regulations of the District. Whatever the legal correctness of this view, it misses the point. No principal has in hand a contract that describes the "standards of performance", the grounds for termination during the four-year term of the contract, or the conditions for renewal at the end of that term.

There is a general job description for principals floating around the District; but some principals have never seen it, and it does not specify standards for judging a principal's performance. We could find no instance where any principal was terminated during the four-year period of a contract, or not renewed on the grounds the contract had expired and performance was inadequate to justify renewal.

Principals must know what is expected of them. The beginning and ending dates of their contracts must be made clear, and so must the ground rules for termination and renewal of contracts. Anything less than a clear understanding of what is required is unfair to both the principals and the District. The way to achieve that understanding is to put it down in writing.

### **The Lack of an Effective Evaluation System**

Specifying standards of performance in the contracts of principals is of no use unless a fair and workable system exists for judging performance against those standards. As of March 4, 1972, each school district in the State of California was required by the Stull Act to develop and adopt specific guidelines for evaluating the performance of certificated personnel.

According to the State Department of Education, over 90% of California's school districts have such a system now in place. However, San Francisco has not yet adopted formal procedures for evaluating administrators and other certificated personnel. The School District is thus in violation of State law, both for principals under contract and for those with administrative tenure prior to the 1971 Charter amendment.

The only evaluation process now used in the District involves a checklist of performance filled out by central office administrators. The use of the form varies. In some cases, the supervisor simply drops by to see the principal for a short visit to talk about the items on the form. We found no instance of any regular discussions with teachers or other personnel at the school, or with parents and others concerned about the school. Similarly, we found no instance where the process is anything but a formality. Whatever real evaluation goes on seems to be informal and outside this system. The basic ingredients of a good evaluation system are missing, i.e., a regular process, a manual or other guidelines for implementing it, involvement of a range of interested parties, and comments by the evaluator and the person evaluated.

### **Selection of Personnel**

The selection of personnel is always a difficult problem. It is now worse as the District loses students, and teachers must be reassigned to other schools. One of the essential ingredients to the success of any school, however, is the compatibility of teachers and other staff. This



requires that the principal have the final say over selection and assignment of staff. We made this point in our School Site Management report, and we reemphasize it here.

The strong principals manage to control the selection of staff one way or another, just as they manage most of the other problems discussed in this report. They do it through friends in the central office administration, an informal network of information on who are the good teachers, and sometimes by complaining enough that an assignment is revoked. Other less aggressive principals are less successful in obtaining the support of those who assign personnel.

To correct this situation the principal needs a veto power over who comes to the school. Otherwise, it is impossible to hold the principal responsible for the school's performance. A good principal will always confer with other staff in such decisions and involve them in the selection process. If the principal exercises the veto in such a way as to exclude good people, or those who may be critical of his or her performance, an effective evaluation system will reveal that, and the principal can be removed. In practice, the principal will end up accepting that school's share of less than ideal teachers, but at least the worst kinds of conflict and non-cooperation among staff can be avoided.

A significant but overlooked job in the school is that of school secretary. San Francisco is one of the few districts in the State which does not have such a position, but instead assigns stenographers and clerks through the City Civil Service system. In some cases the whole atmosphere of the school can be improved, or impaired, by the person in that position, who often becomes almost the alter ego of the principal. It is critical, therefore, that the principal be able to select this person, and also that the position be changed and probably upgraded (see the Commission's report on City/County/District Relationships).

### **School Site Budgeting**

Recently, principals were given authority to transfer funds from one budget category to another as a step toward greater decentralized budget management. The discretion granted, however, is relatively minor. In the case of elementary principals, it amounts to only \$16.57 per student, less than 1% of the per student budget.

Much greater budget flexibility than this is required if principals are to respond to the changing and different needs of their schools. It is not possible within the scope of this report to analyze in detail the areas where flexibility is possible. It is appropriate, however, to note that the present budget approach needs to be changed. Rather than asking if some discretion should be given to the principal, the question should be how much budget control by the Superintendent and central office is absolutely necessary to protect the major policies and priorities of the District and its legal obligations, including those incurred in collective bargaining. Beyond that, the principal should have broad budget discretion, including the flexibility to make trade-offs between different kinds of personnel, different expenditures on supplies and equipment, and different priorities for maintenance and operations.

In order for such annual budget trade-offs to be effective, long-range planning is essential. Future budget projections will be required school by school in order for the principal to decide whether to defray some expenses in one year and incur them in another. Working with the central office, the principal must take a major share of the responsibility for seeing that such projections are made.

### **School Buildings and Grounds**

The maintenance and operation of buildings and grounds is an important management area in which principals need greater authority. In its investigations the Commission ran across one problem after another. In one school, the clocks were not changed for daylight savings for two months because that had to be done by electricians sent out by the central office, even though the custodian had the key and knew how. As a result, class bells had to be rung manually. In another school the principal was not permitted to change the height of adjustable tables, move book cases, or change the locks on doors. All these tasks had to be done by people sent out by the central office.

Sometimes the delays are more than just a nuisance and seriously affect school operations. A newer school with a complex heating and ventilating system has chronic problems with overheating classrooms on the south side of the building and must rely on the central office to arrange for repairs. Toilets get clogged and are not repaired because others are available for student use. In one case this resulted in a delay of months while odors drifted around the building. Windows have to be boarded up because the glazer has not arrived, even though, in some cases, the custodian could make necessary repairs.

## **Training and Support**

The principals interviewed were almost unanimous in stating that they needed outside help and training to do their jobs better, especially if their authority is broadened to include budget discretion and planning. Practical, on-the-job training was preferred over more formal training. One principal, who had received such help in the past, is now working as part of a team of ex-principals which serves as advisors and trainers for their former peers. It was suggested that principals be assigned alone or in small groups to help each other periodically. In order to free them from their jobs to do this for a day or two, the central office could assign an acting or substitute principal.

A recurring theme was the need for support from the central office, particularly with difficult personnel problems and with supplies. While a certain amount of dissatisfaction can be expected in any organization between the central administration and the field, some simple steps need to be taken to improve matters. One is to clarify lines of communication so that principals can get things done more easily. A second is to require that central office personnel respond to requests for assistance within specified time periods. Such personnel would be evaluated on their performance in this regard. Delays in action often are more damaging to the functioning of the schools than saying no.

## **Racial and Ethnic Distribution**

Another problem stems from the fact that a majority of principals reflects the racial and ethnic distribution of the School District that existed 15 years ago. At that time, the majority of San Francisco's pupils were white and nearly all principals and administrators were also white. Today, however, 75% of the students are ethnic minorities. Because more than three-quarters of the principals have been in the school system for more than 15 years (and nearly 60% for more than 20 years), the great majority are still white. Therefore, principals do not reflect the ethnic distribution of the student population.

The District's affirmative action program has shown some success in recent years. Nevertheless, current figures demonstrate that only 25% of San Francisco's students are white, whereas 70% of elementary and secondary principals are white. By contrast, 31% of the students are black, but only 13% of the principals are black. The figures for Asian and Spanish-surnamed students and principals show a similar imbalance.



In most cases, the career line for principals in the School District is through the position of assistant principal. Even if turn-over among principals were anticipated, it is unlikely that the distribution patterns would change because the assistant principals show an even greater concentration of white personnel.

Bringing new people into the system through new employment opportunities is hard. Such opportunities do not arise in a school system that is shrinking, rather than growing. To compound the paralysis of the District's affirmative action program, recent fiscal policies have been designed to send central office administrators back to the school level. Because most of these administrators are also white, this policy will also stunt affirmative action.

Can employment opportunities be expanded through normal retirement? The normal retirement age of 65 would provide new employment opportunities if significant numbers of principals were in older age categories. However, very few principals will reach normal retirement age over the next five years, impeding affirmative action efforts. In fact, a review of the age distribution of principals shows that only 5 will reach retirement age over the next five years, averaging one job opening per year. For assistant principals, only 6 will reach age 65 by 1980. Because new job opportunities will come neither through growth in the system nor through normal retirement suggests that progress in affirmative action requires more emphasis on early retirement. Since in a number of cases the best principals are those closest to retirement age, a selective policy should be employed which encourages some to go and some to stay.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Commission's analysis of the problems identified lead to a number of recommendations to the Board of Education. Some fall readily from the findings; others will require further research by District staff. In all, however, they are designed to reinforce the critical role of the principal, and to hold him or her accountable for the governance of the schools. These series of recommendations are divided according to two major recommendations.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

First, it should be District policy to give principals the authority to make all critical decisions at the school site and to hold them accountable for effective performance.

To implement this policy we recommend the following:

1. Immediate steps should be taken to implement the requirements of the City Charter by executing contracts with all principals appointed after July 1971. These contracts should:
  - a. Be in writing;
  - b. Be for a four (4) year term, as specified in the Charter;
  - c. Include standards of performance which the District shall use to evaluate principals; and
  - d. Include the conditions for termination of employment during term of contract.
2. A system for evaluation of principals should be developed and implemented immediately, as required in the State Education Code, and teachers, parents, the broader community, and older students should have a role in that evaluation.
3. The principal should have authority to make final decisions on selection of all personnel to be employed at the school site, subject to the broad personnel policies of the District.
4. Each principal should have discretion to transfer funds from one school budget category to another, consistent with broad district policies and legal requirements, and should be involved in planning and budgeting for future school operations covering a minimum of three years.
5. Each principal should have full control over operation and maintenance of the school building and grounds.
6. The School District should provide training and support for principals to enable them to exercise these broader powers, including training in budgeting, planning, and proposal writing. in involving staff and community in decision-making, and in personnel management and evaluation.
7. The central office administraton should clearly specify where principals should go for support and assistance when needed, and the organizational structure of the central office should be modified from one designed for line authority over principals to one of support of field operations.

8. Each principal should be held accountable for following District policies, for maintaining a professional climate in the school, for fair evaluation of personnel, for insuring that the school is a safe place, and for fair treatment of students.
9. In exercising these broad powers, each principal must show evidence of involving school personnel, parents, and the broader community in decisions appropriate to the particular needs of the school, and must be held accountable for doing so.

Second, it should be District policy to take every possible step to make the racial and ethnic composition of the ranks of principals correspond more to that of the student body.

To implement this policy we make the following recommendations:

1. The District should develop strong incentives for early retirement and late career changes, even though older principals may be performing effectively.
2. When a principal's job becomes open, the District should give strong consideration in the appointment process to the need for more non-white principals and to the legal requirements for affirmative action.
3. Principals should be recruited from all qualified District personnel who apply, and not only from the ranks of assistant principals, who are largely white.
4. In evaluating the performance of principals, the District should give priority to judging the ability of the principal to relate to students and parents of all racial and ethnic groups.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Commission's analysis and recommendations are predicated on the belief that principals stand at the pivotal point in the educational process. Implementation of some recommendations, such as the execution of contracts, should be done immediately. The Commission recognizes, however, that institutionalizing increased responsibility, authority, and accountability among principals will take time and should be pursued through a deliberate and thoughtful process. Traditional patterns of operation, both at school sites and within the central administration, must be reviewed and re-established, and principals themselves should be actively involved in this process. The Commission believes that the results will improve the educational system.









